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COVER STORY

A WALKING MUSEUM

There's a new effort to highlight the District's place in the fight for equality and justice

BY DANIEL J. SERNOVITZ
dsernovitz@bizjournals.com



In just a few months, with the aid of your feet and a smartphone app, you'll be able to travel back in time, witnessing the role D.C. played, and continues to play, in the nation's ongoing quest for freedom and equality. ¶ Imagine standing outside the historic Howard Theatre on Black Broadway, where legends including Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and the Count Basie Orchestra performed, seeing it both as it exists today, and as it appeared in its heyday. Maybe you'd like to take a selfie with James Brown while you're at it? ¶ Got more time to spare? You could head from Shaw to the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Seventh Street NW in downtown D.C., where you'll find the former Center Market. Among the commodities sold there: meats, veggies, and, until the practice was abolished in 1862, slaves. The building was demolished to make way for what's now the National Archives.

From there, you might want to head across the Anacostia River to Uniontown, one of D.C.'s first suburbs. Uniontowns cropped up across the nation following the Civil War, prompting Congress to rename D.C.'s Uniontown as Anacostia for clarity's sake. You can hear more about that from Frederick Douglass, the noted abolitionist who called that part of the city home.

Those are but three of 51 Steps to Freedom, a larger initiative including an augmented reality tour that a D.C.-based nonprofit aims to launch in beta version later this year to coincide with WorldPride 2025. The platform, traversing eight miles of trails through all eight of D.C.'s wards, highlights more than 300 tales spanning 250 years of history. Users will be brought along through elements including an interactive map, audio tour and art installations.

"It is paying attention, and being very intentional, about directing visitors to parts of the city that they normally would not get to," said Sandra Jowers-Barber, who co-chairs the group's historian advisory committee and also serves as director of the division of humanities and criminology at the University of the District of Columbia Community College, where she's an associate professor of history. "You can do some major museums, and all of that, but you miss the history that takes place in the city, and in the neighborhoods, and you miss the fact that a lot of local, historical actors were national figures."

Why 51 steps? No, the group isn't pushing for D.C. statehood. It's more symbolic, representing the 50 states plus one nation. You can find a list of the 51 steps, starting with the historic Emma V. Brown house in Georgetown, and ending at Black Lives Matter Plaza, at the group's website.

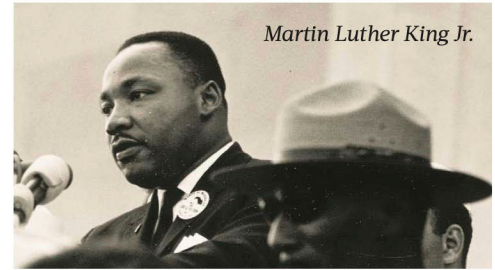
The nonprofit already has a working version of the app and supporting website. It's assembled a cast of speakers both living and dead. AR versions of Douglass and Rosa Parks talk about their roles in history, while D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser tells of the creation of Black Lives Matter Plaza. The group created many of the AR clips using an app called Hoverlay, and you can find some of those clips on the nonprofit's YouTube page.

The effort is similar to Boston's Freedom Trail, which generates more than \$1 billion in annual spending for that city, and like in Boston, the nonprofit behind 51 Steps hopes over time to create physical markers, not just augmented reality, to help tell D.C.'s stories. D.C.'s freedom trail is expected to generate annual economic impact of \$3.1 million in future years after the platform is fully rolled out, which is slated to coincide with the celebration of America's 250th anniversary in 2026.

The nonprofit has raised \$1 million and needs \$3.8 million to complete the first phase of the project, which revolves around the app's initial launch, but it has larger and more costly ambitions for future phases, to include virtual and in-school programs, a painted path linking stops on the trail, and physical markers. To implement all of what it hopes to create through 51 Steps is a much larger lift of around \$10 million.

"It's a very heavy lift, but we've been able to generate enough dollars to get us to where we are now," said Paul J. Cohn, one of the group's founding members and also senior executive officer and co-founder of the restaurant company behind J. Paul's. "We need corporate support. We need to get out there now."

The effort has gained the support of a number of groups and agencies, including Destina-



THE PATH TO FREEDOM

The new 51 Steps project includes the following stops in D.C.'s role in the fight for equality:

1. Emma V. Brown home, 3044 P St. NW
2. Alfred and Hannah Pope home, 2900 O St. NW
3. Holy Rood Cemetery, 2126 Wisconsin Ave. NW
4. Mt. Zion United Methodist Church & Female Union Band Cemetery, 1334 29th St. NW
5. John H. Fleet home, 1208 30th St. NW
6. Yarrow Mamout Residence site, 3324 Dent Place NW
7. Patrick Franchis Healy Hall, Georgetown University, O & 37th streets NW
8. Rose Park, 2609 Dumbarton St. NW
9. O Museum in the Mansion, 2020 O St. NW
10. The Stevens School, 1050 21st St. NW
11. Lisner Auditorium, George Washington University, 730 21st St. NW
12. Dr. Dorothy I. Height Bench, 620 21st St. NW
13. St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 726 23rd St. NW
14. Leonard Grimes Underground Railroad site
15. Dr. Charles Drew home, 3324 Sherman Ave. NW
16. Duke Ellington birth site, 2121 Ward Place NW
17. Charles Hamilton Houston home, 1744 S St. NW
18. Delta Sigma Theta headquarters, 1707 New Hampshire Ave. NW
19. Mary Church Terrell home, 326 T St. NW
20. Josephine Butler Center, 2437 15th St. NW
21. Charles Douglass home, 2002 17th St. NW
22. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. home, 1721 S St. NW
23. St. Augustine Catholic Church, 15th and L streets NW
24. Anacostia's Home Grown Black Business Corridor, 1900-2000 blocks Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE
25. Frederick Douglass home, 1411 W St. SE
26. Barry Farm/Hillsdale (Freedmen Village), 1240 Sumner Road SE
27. Macedonia Baptist Church, 2625 Stanton Road SE
28. United States Colored Cemetery
29. Georgia Douglas Johnson home, 1461 S St. NW
30. Dr. Alain Locke home, 1326 R St. NW
31. Jean Toomer home, 1422 Harvard St. NW
32. Franklin D. Reeves Center, 2000 14th St. NW
33. Ben's Chili Bowl, 1213 U St. NW
34. New Negro Alliances Sanitary Grocery Store protest site, 1936 11th St. NW
35. African American Civil War Museum, 1925 Vermont Ave. NW
36. The Addison Scurlock Studio, 900 U St. NW
37. Howard Theatre, 620 T St. NW
38. Congressman Oscar De Priest Home, 419 U St. NW
39. Dr. Anna Julia Cooper home, 201 T St. NW
40. Dr. Carter G. Woodson home, 1538 9th St. NW
41. A. Philip Randolph House, 817 Q St. NW
42. Blanche Kelso Bruce and Josephine Bruce home, 909 M St. NW
43. 1848 Slave Escape on The Pearl, The Wharf, Southwest
44. Old Center Market, Constitution Avenue NW
45. DAR Constitution Hall, 1776 D St. NW
46. Charles Sumner School, 1201 17th St. NW
47. Ford's Theater, 511 10th St. NW
48. Willard Hotel, 1401 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
49. Lincoln Memorial, 2 Lincoln Memorial Circle NW
50. Metropolitan AME Church, 1518 M St. NW
51. Black Lives Matter Plaza, 16th Street NW



H.H. Leonards, co-founder of The Museum on O Street, which features themed rooms like this one highlighting Elvis Presley



“The pandemic hit...that’s when the visions of this program came. How can I bring traffic back to Washington? How can I bring hope back into people’s hearts?”

H.H. Leonards, who founded 51 Steps to Freedom with Tracy Halliday, pictured left



Cary Hatch, 51 Steps adviser and a former ad exec with Hart, poses with an augmented reality version of James Brown at the Howard Theatre.

tion D.C., the PNC Foundation, the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and Graham Holdings.

The group tried to keep the effort quiet until it had enough assets compiled to begin pitching prospective supporters. Among the first it reached out to was Destination D.C., the city’s main marketing arm. Cohn formerly served on Destination D.C.’s board and saw the obvious potential connection to the region’s tourism industry. They expanded their outreach to others including Phil Mendelson, chair of D.C. Council, and found a receptive audience as they advanced the concept.

“Our sale to the city was the tourism dollars that we hope would come into the city through this very unique presentation, and they all got that, they all bought that,” Cohn said.

As proposed, 51 Steps should provide another entry point for those considering coming to the District, and add to the itinerary for those already planning trips to the nation’s capital, said Elliott Ferguson, president and CEO of Destination D.C. While they’re here, it should draw them into neighborhoods they might not have checked out otherwise, stopping to patronize local shops and restaurants along the way.

“We want them to see this as an option, or at least something they can take advantage of while they’re here,” Ferguson said.

The potential to bring additional dimensions to the past, and make history come alive, is seemingly boundless, Cohn said. Imagine, for example, looking toward the National Mall, and seeing speakers and historic events that unfolded there against the backdrop of the U.S. Capitol and Washington Monument. The nonprofit is now increasing its call to the business community to seek additional sponsorships, including advertising opportunities within the AR tour platform.

“We’re finally ready to say: This is who we are, and we need the help of the corporate community,” Cohn said. “We have enough involvement of the city and the city’s agencies, they’re behind it, but they can’t finance the whole thing, as you know.”

Some of the sites are only memories and photographs now, like the former St. Augustine Catholic Church, the first Black Catholic church in D.C., razed to make way for The Washington Post’s now-former headquarters by 15th and L streets NW. The Post later moved, and its former home was also torn down to make way for what’s now the Fannie Mae-anchored Midtown Center. Other sites endure in physical form, like the Lincoln Memorial, while not all looked as they did back when. You’ll find Nellie’s Sports Bar at the corner of Ninth and U streets NW, but the building was home of the former Addison Scurlock Photography Studio. Scurlock was considered one of the most famous photographers in the nation, capturing the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, among others.

Co-founder H.H. Leonards, who is also founder of the O Museum in The Mansion near Dupont Circle and related Mansion on O Street, came up with the idea for 51 Steps during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, amid the civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd. She recalled how long it took D.C.’s tourism industry to recover from



Paul Cohn, executive officer and co-founder of the restaurant company behind J. Paul's, is a founding member of 51 Steps.

the tragic events of the 9/11 terror attacks, and she didn't want people to stay away from the District that long again.

"The pandemic hit, and then the insurrection hit, and I went to bed for probably three weeks, and that's when the visions of this program came," Leonards said. "How can I bring traffic back to Washington? How can I bring hope back into people's hearts?"

History, come alive

The nation's struggle for freedom and equality is near and dear to Leonards, who became a personal friend of Rosa Parks, considered the mother of the Civil Rights Movement. Parks is best remembered for her refusal to give up her seat on a public bus in 1955, an act that spurred the Montgomery Bus Boycott, though she remained active in the movement for the rest of her life.

Decades later, after Parks was attacked at her home in Detroit in the mid 1990s, she found refuge at the O Street mansion, where she lived until not long before she died in 2005. Leonards often accompanied Parks during trips, including to meet Pope John Paul II, and assisted her with tasks including writing projects.

"Mrs. Parks always said: 'Change one part at a time.' That's what it's all about, and that's how you affect change," Leonards said.

The pandemic-era visions that formed in Leonards' head took the shape of an augmented reality tour of D.C., touching on personalities like legendary singer-songwriter Bo Diddley, Duke Ellington, the jazz pianist, composer and jazz orchestra leader, and Dr. Charles Drew, an American surgeon and medical researcher whose efforts gave rise to large-scale blood banks early in World War II.

There's an abundance of stories about pioneering Washingtonians, and the challenge for 51 Steps became how to tell them in a way that would resonate with people, said co-founder Tracy Halliday, also executive vice president of the O Museum.

"We have all these awesome stories in D.C., of these hidden figures that have fought and dedicated their lives to fighting for all our freedoms," Halliday said. "We knew that those were the stories that we wanted to tell, and then we kind of took a look at it and said, 'Well, how can we tell these stories in a way that everybody would have an opportunity, to want to take the trail?'"

The trail is also populated by lesser-known but equally impactful figures like Etta Horn, who got her start in the 1960s at Barry Farm in Anacostia and went on to the National Welfare Rights Organization; Father Patrick Healey, considered the co-founder of what's now Georgetown University, who was born into slavery; and Josh Gibson, who played for the Homestead Grays at the former Griffith Stadium and became only the second Negro league player to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Howard University Hospital now stands on the site of the former ballpark.

"The idea was to create the largest outdoor museum in the world, and our focus would be on freedom and equality of all people," Jowers-Barber said. "We knew that we had the opportunity to tell the stories so people can understand that we're all in this together, that we all need to fight for these things, and that, fighting for equality for one leads to equality for all." ❧



Through the app, you'll hear in augmented reality from figures including Rosa Parks, who lived at the Mansion on O Street near Dupont Circle later in life.



Elliott Ferguson, Destination D.C. president and CEO